

Relating a personal experience of tutoring middle school students at niagara fall...

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During the fall semester of my freshman year at Niagara University, I was assigned to do my Learn and Serve tutoring at Niagara Falls Middle School. For the first part of the two hours that I spent at the school every Monday, I would observe Mrs. Lesters math study hall. The second half of my day there was in the after school tutoring program, in the cafeteria of the middle school. In both places, I had a chance to work with sixth, seventh, and eighth graders on their homework. Although I am an English major, I was assigned to work with students on their math homework, and what ever else they needed to accomplish before they went home for the evening. All of my experiences at the Niagara Falls Middle School proved to be educational and satisfying.

The first students I helped were struggling eighth grade math students. Julie, the most frustrated girl begged me for at least fifteen minutes to just simply give her the answers to her homework. The rest of the students at the table seemed to think that was a good idea as well, but were not as persistent, because they had found a better way. After I watched all of them run around to find a student with the homework completed, and then proceed to copy it from that student, I figured it was time for some real lesson learning. While they were off copying answers, I sat with Julie and talked her through the worksheet.

Clearly, Julie is a smart girl. She confessed to me that if she could not pass this class, she would not be eligible to swim on the swim team, and that was the main concern on her mind that afternoon. I was worried for a while that I could not get her to focus at all. Finally, I said to her, Julie, I will talk you

through this homework. I will even write down some tricks to help you remember all of this information. But I cannot give you the answers because if I do that, then you will never learn how to do it. I will not be there to take your test for you, and you will be saving time learning now while I am here, rather than copying the homework now and trying to learn it later.

Apparently this made sense to her. After all the students came back chuckling because they had quickly copied all the answers down from someone else, and Julie had not quite completed the homework, I asked them if I could check their work. Funny as it may be, it turned out that the student the rest of the group copied from was not very good in math. I found many errors on the worksheets from the students who cheated. Julie, on the other hand, had all the right answers for the questions she had completed, and knew how she got them. One boy said to Julie, Hey, can I see your paper when youre done? Julie replied verbatim what I had said to her earlier I will not be there to take your test for you, and you will be saving time learning now while I am here, rather than copying the homework now and trying to learn it later.

A big smile appeared on my face after she said that. First of all, the rest of her friends sat down and worked out the problems by them selves. Second of all, Julie was getting the hang of her math homework, in which case she was going to be able to swim for the swim team. And third, she learned a lesson in life about taking shortcuts. I spent about a half hour with her, and already so much had been accomplished. I cannot imagine what I will be able to do when I work day in and day out with young people like her. My second

experience occurred one day when I was sitting in Mrs. Lesters classroom. A teacher from a different study hall wandered into her room, and saw me without work for a moment. He approached me, asked if I would like to help a student, and of course I accepted. As we walked back to the room where the student was waiting, the teacher explained to me, Now, Michael is very difficult. I do not want you to stress yourself out over him. He has had this assignment to do for two weeks, and will not even look at it. If he gives you trouble, just get up and leave. This will be a real challenge. A bit intimidated, I followed him into the classroom. In the front row, a somewhat small child sat alone. After the teacher introduced us, he said, Michael, Katie is here to help you. If you do not work hard on this, she is going to leave, and that will be your last chance to complete this assignment.

After he left, I asked Michael what he had to do. Michael told me that he had to write about a computer program he had mastered, which was Sim City 3000. He talked for about five straight minutes to me about the technicalities of the game. I figured that he would be able to write a great paper on the game since he knew so much. After he explained a bit, I said, Okay, now write that down on the paper. He then told me he hated to write. Being the English major that I am, I had never had this problem, and I was so disappointed. Michael is so intelligent, and if he could only get his words on paper, he could be a straight A student. Finally, I got him to cooperate. It helped that I knew something about the game; I think he was especially impressed that a girl played with computer games. He did tell me that I should try something a little more intense, which made me chuckle. Within

twenty minutes, we had the assignment completed, and when I took it back to the teachers, they were astonished that I had such a good outcome with Michael. I told them that he was very bright, and that I didn't think he was that much trouble at all. I learned two weeks later that they were considering moving him up a grade. I am just happy that his intelligence is now recognized.

In the after school tutoring program that Niagara Middle School offers, students are given the opportunity to come in and work on their homework until three-thirty in the afternoon, with tutors from Niagara University. This gives them a chance to ask questions and work with their friends. I got extremely attached to the sixth grade honors students, who were always toiling with their math homework. As much as they humored me with their gossip stories and funny jokes, I loved working with them. Jake, one of the sixth graders, seemed to have a much harder time than any of his friends on the math homework. I think it was mostly because he had trouble concentrating with all of the girls talking to him all the time. After a while, however, I told Jake to focus and then he would have an easier time getting his homework done. Sure enough, he did. I found that I had to put math into his terms most times. He would be struggling on a problem and I would say, If you have eight dollars and you owe me twelve dollars, how many more do you need? This all made sense to Jake, and he could answer me with the correct response. After I found that this worked with him, it stuck. If I noticed that he was getting off track, I would glance at his paper, and read the next question. All I would have to do is say Jake, how much do you have if you

received ten dollars for your birthday and then I gave you six more? He would then quickly snap back into math mode and write the answer down on his paper.

I found my experience with the sixth graders to be especially rewarding. One day, though, a little girl was sitting by herself at a table close to where I was standing before my usual crew strolled in. I asked her if she needed any help, and, indeed, she did. Ashley was a very friendly girl, and I found out that she was in sixth grade, but she clearly was not in the same classes as the kids that I usually helped on Wednesday afternoons. At first she seemed a little slow and unsure of herself. Later on into her work, though, I found that, even if she was not very bright, she definitely liked to work hard, and accomplish things. Early on, she had set a goal for her afternoon, and she reached it. She wanted to finish her math homework and start her social studies, because she had an appointment in the evening, and had to manage her time. I was very impressed that she had mapped all of this out. In the midst of our meeting, another tutor approached me and said that Jake had requested my help. I looked over and saw him sitting there in the midst of his friends, clearly not getting anything done. Also, another tutor was sitting by him, looking quite frustrated. I asked Ashley if she knew the other children at that table, and she replied that she did not. I was a little concerned about how I was going to help both of them at the same time. I remember how it was in sixth grade, and I did not want to make Ashley feel uncomfortable around the other kids with whom she was not friends. I decided to give it a shot. I sat Ashley down next to me, and Jake was on my

other side. I explained that I was going to help both of them at the same time, and introduced everyone to Ashley.

Thankfully, everyone was nice to her, even though she was not in that circle of friends. It was good for her to see that even the smart kids need help, especially Jake, the most popular boy in the class. I think that everyone learned more than math that day, but also how to accept each other and help each other. The students that I helped at Niagara Middle School are my first sign that I am definitely in the right field of study at college. I am eager to continue my studies of secondary education at Niagara University.